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A TOP DOI OFFICIAL HAD AT LEAST SIX MEETINGS WITH THE MINING INDUSTRY. SHE THEN HELPED CANCEL A STUDY ON THE PUBLIC-HEALTH EFFECTS OF MINING.

Records obtained by Pacific Standard reveal that a top official at the DOI had a hand in nixing a government-funded public-health study in Appalachia—after a series of meetings with some of the most powerful mining players in the country.

JIMMY TOBIAS · JUN 11, 2018

Executive branch figureheads like [Scott Pruitt](#), [Ryan Zinke](#), and President [Donald Trump](#) himself get almost all of the press coverage, but when it comes to the machinations of the American government they are just a portion of the story. Beneath and behind these attention-grabbing politicians is an array of appointees who labor outside the spotlight and wield great power. These are the "people working far from the cameras and the West Wing," "the next-level-down guys," as a [recent article](#) in *The New Yorker* describes them. They are the assistant secretaries, the deputies, the senior advisers, the solicitors, and other political operatives carrying out the Trump administration's agenda. They are the men and women remaking the executive branch in the image of the president's right-wing political movement, and very few people know their names.

Consider the Department of the Interior (DOI), where such appointees make momentous decisions under a cloak of near-anonymity. They include people like [Daniel Jorjani](#), the principal deputy solicitor who helped rollback federal protections for migratory bird species last December. They include [Douglas Domenech](#), the assistant secretary of insular affairs who appears to have violated federal ethics rules when he met twice last spring with a Koch-linked conservative organization that previously employed him. They include [Vincent DeVito](#), an adviser to Zinke who has a track record of using his position to help industry groups fulfill their desires.

Katharine MacGregor, the principal deputy assistant secretary for land and minerals management, is another little-known but immensely influential official at the DOI. A former [staffer for](#) the House Natural Resources Committee, which is led by Representative Rob Bishop (R-Utah), MacGregor now helps oversee the Bureau of Land Management and other agencies responsible for regulating resource extraction on hundreds of millions of acres of public land and water. Like many second-tier political appointees, MacGregor both shapes government policy and serves as a key emissary to industries favored by the Trump administration.

A review of MacGregor's work calendar, which was obtained through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, shows a large number of meetings with fossil fuel firms, industry lobbyists, and other commercial interests during her first year in office. According to her calendar, MacGregor met well over 100 times with extractive industry groups or representatives between January of 2017 and January of 2018. At the same time she held a mere handful of meetings—fewer than 10, according to my tally—with conservation organizations like The Wilderness Society and Sportsmen for the Boundary Waters. Some of MacGregor's meetings, moreover, involved industries and organizations that later benefited directly from decisions made by agencies under her purview.

MacGregor's activities underscore the crucial role that Trump administration appointees play in opening the Department of the Interior to industry influence. And like other appointees, MacGregor's low profile allows her to do this work with minimal public scrutiny.

MacGregor's behind-the-scenes influence comes through clearly in the DOI's controversial decision to abruptly halt and ultimately cancel an important government-funded public-health study in Appalachia last year.

Back in 2016, the Obama administration asked the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine to initiate an independent evaluation of the health impacts of mountaintop removal coal mining in Appalachia. It hoped to explore the risks posed to humans by that particularly extreme form of strip mining. Not long after taking office, however, Trump's Department of the Interior decided to scrap the research. Last August, the DOI's Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement sent the National Academies a letter ordering the group to "cease all activities" related to the study.

The coal industry seemed pleased. In a letter to the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* published shortly after the study's cancellation, the president of the National Mining Association questioned the legitimacy of the research and called it a "symbolic gesture left over from an anti-coal administration."

Appalachian environmentalists, on the other hand, were dismayed.

"The study was a project that some viewed as anti-coal," says Erin Savage, a program manager with the non-profit Appalachian Voices, which opposes mountaintop removal mining. "It certainly feels as if it was canceled to help protect the industry."

Newly released records offer supporting evidence for Savage's assertion. Emails obtained through a FOIA request show that Katharine MacGregor had a hand in ensuring the health study's cancellation. Indeed, she appears to have been keenly interested in the matter.

On August 17th, 2017, MacGregor sent a prodding email to Glenda Owens, then the acting director of the OSMRE, concerning the study.

"Hey Glenda -- I thought you told me on the phone that this was postponed?" she wrote.

Owens responded a few minutes later, apologetically: "Hey Kate, No, sorry if I was not clear. We are contacting [the National Academies] tomorrow both by phone and sending letter to memorialize conversation."

In a later email, MacGregor ordered Owens to update her once the study was halted: "Glenda - Let me know how the call goes tomorrow after it is made."

The next day, on August 18th, Owens sent a letter to the National Academies in which she officially told the organization to stop working on the health study. As requested, she then forwarded the letter to MacGregor.

In a statement, DOI spokesperson Faith Vander Voort confirmed that the study "was paused for several months, but was closed out in April" after a review concluded that it was "redundant."

MacGregor's role in the study's cancellation is noteworthy for one principal reason: In the months leading up to the cancellation, her calendar shows that she had no fewer than six meetings with the most powerful mining players in the country. In both April and May of 2017, she met with the National Mining Association. In March and June, meanwhile, she met with Arch Coal, a long-time practitioner of mountaintop removal mining in Appalachia.

MacGregor's involvement in this case is just one example of a broader trend—she appears to have a habit of meeting repeatedly with industries and organizations that later receive favorable treatment from agencies she helps oversee. Among many meetings with industry lobbyists, executives, or front groups since taking office, her calendar shows she participated in multiple gatherings with Exxon Mobil, Shell, Statoil, Conoco Phillips, the National Petroleum Council, the American Exploration and Production Council, and the Western Energy Alliance.

MacGregor's calendar also shows that she participated in at least six meetings last spring and summer with lobbyists or executives affiliated with Twin Metals Minnesota, a firm owned by the Chilean mining giant Antofagasta plc that wants to build a copper-nickel mine near the Boundary Waters wilderness in northern Minnesota. The Obama administration had taken measures to block the proposed mine, which is ardently opposed by conservationists in the region. Trump's Department of the Interior, however, has worked diligently to reverse course and get the mine up and running. Just last month, the Bureau of Land Management, which MacGregor's office helps supervise, reinstated the company's mineral rights leases near the wilderness area. Environmental groups in Minnesota have vowed to sue over the decision.

MacGregor's calendar also shows she and colleagues held an April of 2017 meeting with the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a Koch-brother-linked conservative group that has a history of opposing environmental regulations. At the time of the meeting, the TPPF was representing a group of Texas landowners in a legal dispute with the Bureau of Land Management. As I wrote in a previous piece, the Bureau of Land Management later settled the lawsuit in what the TPPF described as a "major win."

Vander Voort, the DOI spokesperson, said that MacGregor is "happy to make time to meet with whomever requests a meeting," including conservation groups. "We have always welcomed input from all citizens and will continue to listen to ideas and concerns from anyone interested in sharing them."